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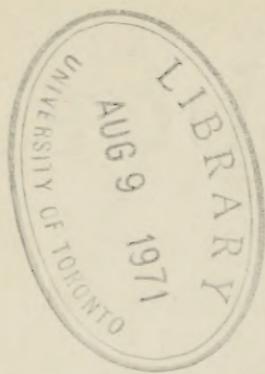
Ghose, Atulya
The deluge

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THE DELUGE

ATULYA GHOSH



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The latest estimate of the Government about the devastation caused by the North Bengal floods tells us that an area of 11,000 sq. miles and 50 lakhs of people have been affected. This is, in my opinion, a very rough idea of the recent havoc; we should try to have a complete picture of the situation in the North Bengal districts. Besides, there is also the need of a thorough and careful study of and inquiry into the problems posed by the floods.

The normal average rainfall in West Bengal is 52 inches in a year, but in North Bengal there were 37 inches of rainfall in 36 hours. This is unprecedented and records of the last one hundred years show that there was never such a heavy rainfall in such a limited area. Hence it will not be incorrect if it is suggested that the main reason of the disaster in North Bengal is heavy rainfall. The heavy rainfall in the hilly areas of North Bengal naturally resulted in floods in all the rivers, streams, rivulets and fords which were in spate and there was a heavy onrush of water. It will be interesting to note in this connection that there were unprecedented rains in Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal as well and normal life there had been paralysed. Most of the rivers of North Bengal originate in Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal. The rivers Teesta, Torsa, Santokh, Mahananda, Jaldhaka along with many other streams, known and unknown, were in spate and thus caused unbelievably high floods in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar; similarly, floods in the link rivers Atreyee, Tangon, Purnarbhaba and Mahananda and other rivers caused damages in the districts of West Dinajpur and Maldah. Over and above all these, the excess water of floods in Bihar inundated the latter two districts.

We shall be able to assess the damages caused by the recent floods only if we consider it against this background. In the districts of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar water (at some places at a height of 40 ft.) rushed in full force carrying along with it big boulders, trees and stones. In southern Bengal, receding flood waters leave behind them a fertile deposit of soil which raises production in the following year but in North Bengal the floods have carried gravels of stones which will make the vast cultivable land barren and unproductive for years to come.

What has happened in North Bengal is a cumulative effect of disasters caused not only by floods but other calamities as well. The most important calamity that occurred along with the floods was a total dislocation of the communications. In North Bengal alone three railway systems—Narrow Gauge, Metre Gauge and Broad Gauge lines—operate. Landslides in the hills dislocated the narrow gauge line and the floods washed away the bridges of the metre gauge and broad gauge system. The consequence was a thorough paralysis of the three railway systems at the same time.

Roads Destroyed

There are many National Highways in this region of North Bengal. One of them goes to Sikkim via Kalimpong; a second one runs through the Sevak Bridge and the Dooars to Cooch Behar and finally to Assam and the third Highway passes over the new Teesta Bridge near Jalpaiguri town through Maynaguri joining the old National Highway. These roads serve as the only link connecting North Eastern India with the rest of the country. The collapse of the Anderson Bridge resulted in the dislocation of the only connecting link between the Kalimpong sub-division, Bhutan and Sikkim with the rest of India. Floods and landslides devastated these thoroughfares and the region was isolated from the rest of the

country. The extent of the dislocation can be somewhat imagined when we know that it took fifteen days to connect the sub-division with the district headquarters. Even now the Kalimpong sub-division remains disconnected by road. The 52 miles long hill cart road from Siliguri to Darjeeling is now open after a period of twenty days.

The floods have destroyed nearly 200 big and small bridges. The most important among them are: (1) the Anderson Bridge over the Teesta near Teesta Bazar; (2) the metre gauge railway bridge near the Coronation Bridge; (3) a broad gauge railway bridge upon another branch of the Teesta. Of the three road bridges and two railway bridges over the Teesta, one road bridge and one railway bridge have been destroyed. As a result of the destruction of a railway bridge upon another river, the broad gauge railway line does not operate beyond New Jalpaiguri. The metre gauge Assam Railway line from Siliguri to Alipore Duar is closed. No one knows exactly when the narrow gauge railway line between Siliguri and Darjeeling will operate again.

It is to be remembered in this connection that as the important roads and railway lines were breached as a result of the floods and breach of river embankments, so also were innumerable small roads connecting the villages with the trading centres and market places in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar destroyed as a result of the landslides and breaches.

Although the extent of havoc in the districts of Malda and West Dinajpur is not as heavy as in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling nearly 60,000 residential houses in Malda and 80,000 houses in West Dinajpur have been destroyed. The loss of crops in these districts is beyond any estimate. Nearly all the tea gardens in Darjeeling and some gardens in Jalpaiguri district have suffered immeasurable damage. In Cooch Behar apart from tea gardens, the food crops and other cash crops also heavily suffered.

As a result of the landslides, practically the entire water supply system of Darjeeling has been demolished and the people in the villages have to procure drinking water with great difficulty. The water works of Jalpaiguri town became thoroughly damaged and the story does not end there. Nearly all the tube-wells and tanks in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts became silted up or polluted. This means that the supply of drinking water has been very seriously affected. It is difficult to ascertain when the normal water supply will be restored.

There was failure of electricity in all the towns and villages of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts. It was not in Jalpaiguri town alone but in the entire North Bengal area there was a complete failure of electricity as a result of the damage caused to the Jaldhaka power supply centre.

Innumerable dwelling houses have collapsed in all the five districts of North Bengal and the number may well exceed a few lakhs. Nobody can fully ascertain the figure unless all means of communications are restored.

Thousands of cattle died either in the onrush of flood waters or were buried under the silt. It has not yet been possible to remove all the carcasses. Cattle still alive have nothing to feed themselves upon.

Human Casualties

According to a very conservative estimate of the Government the number of people died is between 2,000 and 2,500 in the two districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. But one must not forget that full figures of human casualties are still not available since communications among different parts of the regions are not yet restored. All bazars, market places, trading centres, small shops, from where people would secure their daily necessities have perished. There is none who

can even advance short-term loans to the town people and villagers. This means that the economic system has completely collapsed in the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. It is now a question of crores of rupees to resettle the economy that has been shattered.

Primary schools, secondary and higher secondary schools, colleges—all types of educational institutions have suffered a severe shock, recovery from which is a far cry at the moment. Students have not only lost their books, they have as well lost the very school buildings including their equipment and implements, where they used to prosecute their studies. All the health centres and hospitals, small or big, have also collapsed.

Rebuilding the houses that have been destroyed, thatched cottages, corrugated tin sheds and pucca buildings would need crores of rupees. It is impossible to make an assessment of the total requirements in terms of money. The Government has proposed to advance loans but in the present situation it will be difficult even to think of asking for repayment of loans. One requires securities for loans, but in North Bengal if it is insisted upon 95 per cent of the affected people will be unable to avail themselves of any loan.

Many parts of Jaipaiguri district has been developed through the efforts of East Pakistan refugees. These places have been turned into deserts and graveyards again. Who will stand security for them so as to enable them to get loans? What has happened in North Bengal cannot be described in a single word—be it flood or landslide or something else. If we can imagine what a DELUGE can be, perhaps then we can have an idea of what has taken place in North Bengal.

First thing to Note

If we deeply analyse the situation in North Bengal today it will become evident that no piecemeal programme of tempo-

rary relief and rehabilitation can help restoration of normal life in the region. The places which have been developed through a sustained effort stretched over a period of fifty to sixty years and have suddenly become graveyards, cannot be restored to normality through any partial planning. Some 200 bridges that have been swept away took fifty years to be built, if another five to seven years are allowed to pass for their repairs, restoration of normal life of the area too will be delayed to that extent.

Proper arrangements for warning people regarding floods and landslides must be made in a full-proof manner in the future. At the same time it is essential that railways and road communication systems, water-supply and supply of electricity are restored ; schools and institutions, shops and bazaars, the dwelling houses of the people are rebuilt and the wasteland is reclaimed and made fit for cultivation. All these have to be done simultaneously and without any delay. So far as immediate relief and rehabilitation schemes are concerned they have to be implemented through offices set up in the different parts of the affected region with special officers-in-charge of the job. If we take the beaten track and try to solve the problem of rehabilitation in North Bengal in the ordinary accepted manner, the result will be a failure, as has been the case with the scheme for rehabilitation of East Bengal refugees which has failed in West Bengal.

Herculean Task

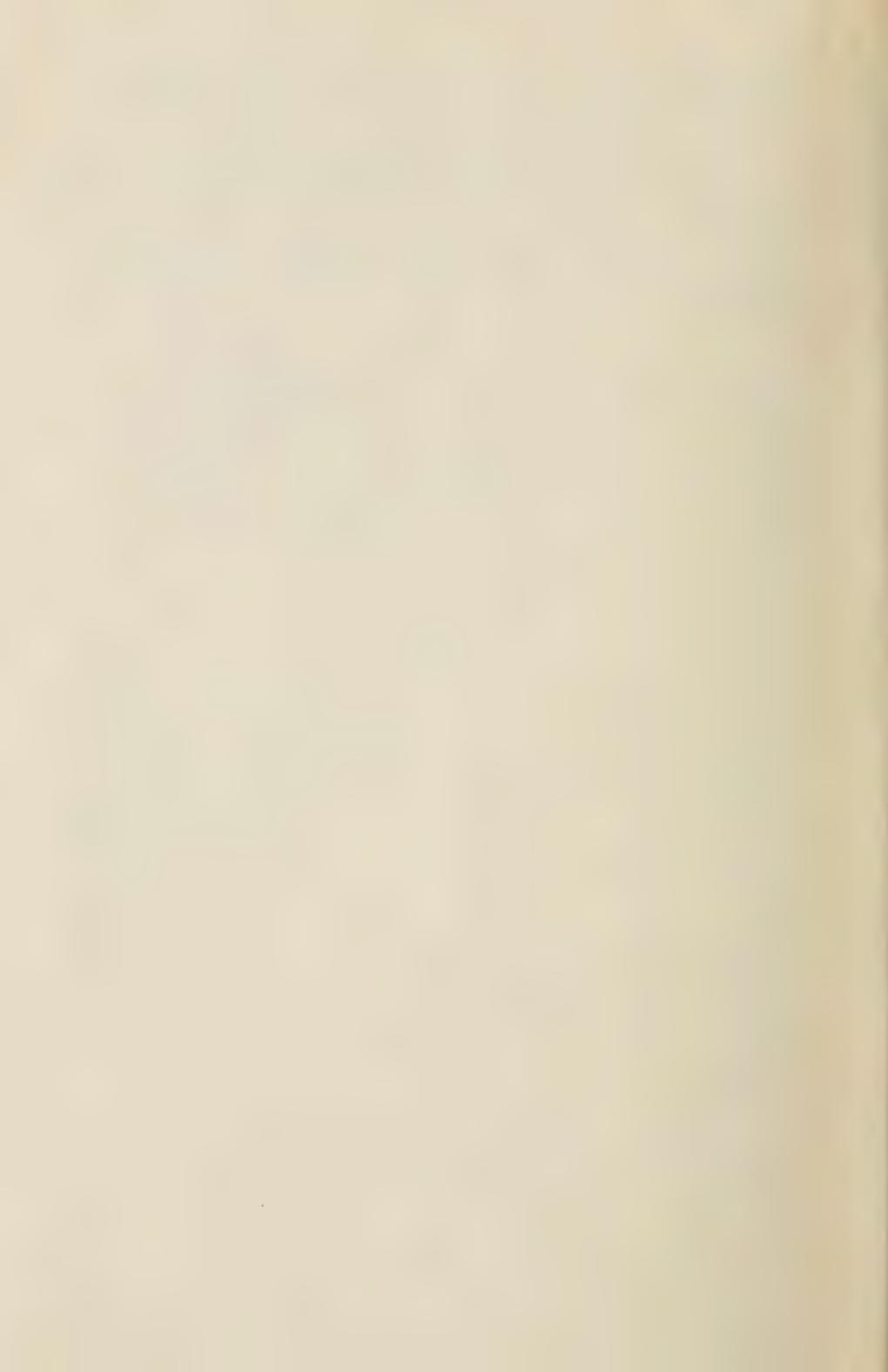
The task that is set before us in North Bengal is a Herculean one ; the West Bengal Government does not have the required means to face it alone. Unless the Central Government comes forward with all its resources, the gigantic task of rebuilding what has been destroyed can never be fulfilled. We require a total and a complete plan and also immediate implementation of the same. We must remember that any delay in the formulation and implementation of a plan for reconstruction of such a

plan will make the problem more complex and greater will be the suffering of the people. In short, we have to achieve within two years that had been developed through fifty to sixty years of constructive efforts and have been suddenly destroyed. This is a very difficult task and the Government has to perform the job with the co-operation of the people. The task is no doubt stupendous, but we must remember that this is a challenge to humanity.

In the ordinary planning process, efficient experts are required. But what is needed in North Bengal today is a comprehensive programme which has to be implemented by workers with a spirit of devotion, service and strong determination. The departmental wrangling between the Central Government and State Government about apportioning responsibilities of rehabilitation should be put aside until the work is complete.

Special Agency Needed

The big challenge cannot be taken up by a single Government department or by a few experts. We require an organisation which understands the problem comprising representatives of all the Government departments. Unless planning and execution run simultaneously it will be impossible to resolve the crisis in North Bengal. Usually implementation of plans is delayed due to various procedural and technical complications. We have to rise above those usual obstacles. We can perhaps face the challenge if the Central and State Governments co-ordinately organise a Special Agency whose only responsibility will be the planning for reconstruction and rehabilitation of North Bengal and immediate implementation of the plan.



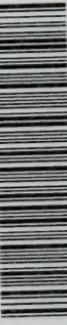
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